

Charles Smoot at Schenectady County Community College Health Profession Opportunity Grant

Charles Smoot thinks about his education as an asset. He is quick to point out that it is not a tangible asset (like a house, a car, or even a job); rather it is a measure of worth that, regardless of life's hiccups and setbacks, can never be taken from him. He has had other assets—jobs, relationships, his own business—that have been lost. Even his health has been threatened, so much so that he began accepting that he would lose his life in a battle with cancer. But through it all, Charles has come to realize that his education (a Bachelor's degree in Psychology, an Associate's degree in Mortuary Science, and a newly earned New York State Certified Nurse Aide licensure) can never be taken from him, and therefore it is the most reliable asset he has.

A recent graduate from Schenectady County Community College's Certified Nurse Aide program, a Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) program funded by the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Family Assistance, Charles is working for The Altamont Program, Inc. as a substance abuse rehabilitation counselor. His experience with the college's HPOG program brought Charles back to a place he has always felt revitalizes the best in him—the classroom. In the program's first IBEST (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training) class, he took advantage of a great opportunity to get back to what makes him thrive—the life of a student required to demonstrate discipline, dedication, consistency, and hard work. Charles now had expectations placed upon him by his instructors, his fellow students, his employment specialist, and his wife. "I was spending my time watching TV, sitting around all day doing nothing. That lifestyle can make you lose your sense of self-worth," he says.

A former business owner and professional undertaker, Charles spent most of his professional life working in funeral homes. But a long battle with drugs, the opening and closing of a business he hoped would make a cultural shift in his community, and a debilitating battle with cancer left him extremely discouraged. "I don't do well at failing; I'm a terrible quitter. I was sitting in my living room, and I could look out the window and see where I wanted to go, but I wasn't there." An accidental walk past Albany Community Action Partnership (ACAP) helped Charles connect with an employment specialist and a training program that would ultimately lead him where he wanted to go. "I was haphazard before this class started. If you give me wiggle room, I'm going to wiggle. I had to wait before I could get into class, but my employment specialist at ACAP, Sonya, kept my head in it. She helped me hang on and stay focused on what I wanted, and I got in."

Soon, Charles began his Certified Nurse Aide class and met his instructors and students, learning quickly that he was the oldest person in the class. "It didn't matter. I learned a lot from them, and I hope they learned a lot from me. I don't know if I would've made it through if my classmates and instructors weren't there to push me. I hate math, I've always struggled with math, but I was actually learning math!"

The hard work and support paid off, and Charles can now call himself a Certified Nurse Aide, among many other things. "The things I learned in class I use every day at my job and in my

personal life. The healthcare field is all about working with people, and that's where I belong. I'm grateful that this program helped me get there."

Now Charles is very busy working full time, taking care of his dog, and keeping his wife happy. He has bigger dreams of once again owning his own business and continuing his education. "I will never be too old to want to learn. Sonya gave me a poster one day that said, 'If it's something you want, you'll make a way; if it's something you don't want, you'll make an excuse.' I'm done making excuses, and I'm glad I'm finding my way."